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ABSTRACT

This paper describes Contact North/Contact Nord, a pilot project that attempts to improve strategies for distance education in Northern Ontario, Canada. The goals of the program include meeting ongoing and future educational needs of rural Canadians by improving the design and operation of technologically enhanced distance education programs. The project aims to enhance institutional collaboration in distance education course development, course credit transfer, and common open learning systems. Ministries of the Ontario government cooperated with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities to support the four-year, $20 million project. A fund was established to encourage proposals for a new development framework. Institutions either geographically or philosophically isolated worked to design collaborative projects. Monies were budgeted to implement a uniform, automated library service that was accessible across northern Ontario. The colleges' video production resources are used cooperatively and partner institutions are able to offer enhanced academic resources--specialized expertise can be traded for practical field experience, for example. Contact North/Contact Nord has configured its distance education network to accommodate a wide variety of delivery modes, the most common being print and audio tape packages supplemented by audio and computer conferencing. Collaboration is facilitated by local community site coordinators. Francophone and Native American liaison officers have been contracted to work with targeted groups. The document concludes that, while it is still early to assess the impact of the Contact North/Contact Nord project, Ontario will have pioneered an advancement in distance education. (TES)

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Fourth Annual Conference
on Teaching at a Distance

Changing Roles in Education and Training

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COOPERATION AND COLLABORATION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

THE CONTACT NORTH/CONTACT NORD EXPERIENCE

Submitted to the:

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Madison Wisconsin, August 1988

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INTRODUCTION

Cooperation and collaboration has the capacity to renew and invigorate distance education with the commitment and resources that have been missing in many jurisdictions. Historically models of cooperation have been effective strategies to assist institutions in overcoming problems associated with technological change. Educational institutions must develop strategies which allow them to participate, compete and lead within the emerging information age without depleting their limited human and capital resources.

These strategies must incorporate the risks and benefits of cooperation. The International Extension College/Council for Educational Technology (1987)[1] has ranked these strategies in relation to risk and potential benefit as follows:

Low risk — Modest Benefits

* Sharing information
* Exchanging experience
* Exchanging advisers and consultants
* Collaborative staff training
* Accepting each other's students
* Acquiring and/or exchanging external materials
* Collaborating on evaluating external materials
* Collaborating on adaption of materials
* Cooperating on development of related course units
* Establishing credit transfer arrangements
* Creating a common open learning system

High Risks — Major Benefits

The Contact North/Contact Nord project attempts to move institutions from the low risk/modest benefit end of the spectrum up into those areas of higher risk and major benefit.

1 International Extension College/Council for Educational Technology, (1987), Commonwealth Co-operation in Open Learning, Commonwealth Secretariat, London, UK.

BACKGROUND AND DESCRIPTION OF CONTACT NORTH/CONTACT NORD PROJECT

Contact North/Contact Nord is a new initiative designed to enhance distance education opportunities in Northern Ontario, Canada. The population of Northern Ontario is thinly spread over a large geographic area. Northern Ontario contains 9/10 of the land area of Ontario but only 1/10 of the population.There are two universities and five community colleges offering post-secondary programming within this region. Each of these institutions has a regional mandate and has developed some limited capacity to deliver programming within the region. This delivery has most often consisted of correspondence, visiting lectures, and community facilitation techniques. In addition, secondary correspondence education has been delivered via correspondence mode from the Ministry of Education's Independent Learning Centre in Toronto.

The central thesis of the Contact North/Contact Nord project is that access to education at all levels could be improved through a combined effort. Further, such an effort, with appropriate resources applied, would create a synergistic effect beyond the resources or capabilities of any one of the participating educational institutions. While at this writing it is premature to comment on the effects of establishing the network, the process and policies of doing so are instructive.

Several ministries of the Ontario government cooperated with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities to establish provincial financial and policy resources for the project. The Minister announced the initiative on October 20, 1986, and gave direction to establish the network on an operational footing by September 1, 1987.

The four year, 20 million dollar pilot project is designed to achieve the following objectives:

1) To improve access to formal educational opportunities at the secondary and post-secondary level for residents of Northern Ontario.

2) To establish a long-term capacity to improve access to other training and informal educational opportunities.

3) To meet the ongoing and emerging educational needs of residents in communities remote from conventional delivery sources by use of new information and communication technologies.

4) To meet the special needs of francophone and native peoples in Northern Ontario.

5) To create new and expand existing expertise in the design and operation of technologically enhanced distance education programs in Northern Ontario.

6) To create models for the alternative delivery of educational services capable of:

   a) application more broadly throughout Ontario.
   b) application to the needs of other jurisdictions, including developing countries.

7) To create a "test-bed" to evaluate the effectiveness of various technologies in delivering distance education.

In northwest Ontario, Confederation College and Lakehead University were asked to jointly establish and administer the Contact North/Contact Nord project as regional contractors. At the same time, Cambrian College and Laurentian University were asked to assume this role in the northeast region of the province.

During the planning process prior to the establishment of Contact North/Contact Nord, several government departments became involved. Gradually the lead was taken by the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, with Education and Northern Development also heavily involved. Two committees were eventually struck: the Provincial Management Group, consisting of five senior civil servants and the Provincial Management Committee, consisting of representatives from seven ministries and the Ontario Educational Communications Authority, personnel from the four northern contractors and the two regional coordinating centres.

A formal process for strategic planning and evaluation has been established to consider long term implications for the future of the project.

COOPERATION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Grossman (1987)[2] has argued that delivery institutions should insist on producing and teaching only its own distance education courses. Although Grossman's arguments have merit, the logistics and costs of producing distance education materials and recovering those costs by delivering to large numbers of students, would make participation by smaller institutions in distance education impossible. Only by working cooperatively, in collaboration with other institutions can the members of small faculties accept the responsibilities and earn the rewards of developing their own distance education programming.

A portion (40%) of the Contact North/Contact Nord funding has been allocated to establish the Northern Distance Education Fund. The government intent in establishing this development fund was both to recognize the up-front cost of new programs and to encourage a new development framework. The conditions of application to the fund include the following:

i) priority given to projects undertaken in a collaborative manner
ii) full programs, not courses to be developed
iii) content and delivery methodology to clearly meet northern needs
iv) development of new programs not currently available in Ontario
v) encourage quality development by the use of course team approach

To date 22 projects were approved for feasibility studies and 15 full degree or certificate programs have been approved for funding under the program. Development partners must demonstrate ongoing commitment of resources both in the development and the delivery phases of programming developed under the Fund. The Contact North/Contact Nord delivery network, the "electronic highway" is to be considered by each development proposal, but the proposal may, in turn, further define this network.

All programs which receive development monies under this fund will be delivered in the north of the province by northern institutions. However, by agreement, the entire program is licensed to the provincial government and therefore becomes "public domain" within the provincial educational system.

2 Grossman, David, M., Electronic College Courses - The Professor Must be in Charge, Chronicle of Higher Education, 2-11-87.

The effect of this initiative has been remarkable. Institutions traditionally isolated either geographically, or philosophically are designing situations for collaboration. In one case the two northern universities resolved differing academic perspectives on community health care in their co-development of a professional degree in Nursing (Bachelor of Science of Nursing) to be accredited by both institutions. A program proposal in the field of gerontology originally submitted jointly by five regional community colleges received subsequent support from a provincial association seeking a similar training program.

The requirement to develop programs as opposed to courses, and to avoid duplication has encouraged creative combinations. Lakehead University has, for example, proposed jointly with a university in Southern Ontario to design new certificates in the Professional Outdoor Recreation and Environmental Studies. These certificates will include existing audio-visual materials, newly produced video and non-credit seminars delivered live to regional access sites via teleconferencing.

Benefits arising directly from this co-operative approach have been identified in at least two secondary areas: support systems and professional development. Early in the project, monies were budgeted to improve both the media production and library resources of the Northern institutions. This will allow the implementation of a uniform, automated library service, at the university level accessible across the north of the province. Video production resources at the Colleges will be used by staff and faculty on a cooperative basis to the benefit of both students and programming.

Student support and benefit can be greatly enhanced by inter-institutional planning. Study skills, seminars delivered either by teleconferencing or by face-to-face seminars at access sites are offered to many distance education students. Partner institutions, co-developing a program are able to offer enhanced academic resources; for example, specialized academic expertise can be traded for practical field experience or other specializations.

The collaborative interchange of personnel resources at both the proposal and the program development stages provides a working education for administrative, instructional and support staff. Such collaborative ventures demand both formal professional development at the institutions, and also continuous practice in the skills of problem solving and consensus building.

The issues resulting from this new developmental framework are multiple and complex. Operational definitions of collaboration, course team and ownership or copyright must be resolved from the outset. Traditional institutional concerns arise on matters such as territory, institutional mandates, joint accreditation, academic credibility, funding formulae and credit portability. Policy and politics impact on the selection process, the program scope and flexibility.

To succeed, a development program such as the Northern Distance Education Fund needs centralized planning and sufficient funding to allow innovation. At the institutional level, the administration must support and facilitate change. Finally, the operational guidelines for development must allow flexibility within general parameters to support creative application.

COOPERATION IN DELIVERY

In order to accommodate the widest variety of delivery modes currently in use by distance education delivery institutions in Ontario, Contact North/Contact Nord has configured its network with a heterogeneous collection of educational delivery technologies. A 40 port digital teleconferencing bridge as well as the CoSy computer conferencing system was purchased for each of the two centrally located regional coordinating centres. Each of the 27 access sites is equipped with a teleconferencing convener, a facsimile machine, a video tape playback system and television, an IBM AT and a Unisys ICON microcomputer as well as an audio cassette recorder and telephone answering system. Telewriter II audiographic devices have recently been purchased to enhance the teleconferencing capacity.

From the perspective of the remote communities, Contact North/Contact Nord consists of a small adult education classroom which is available as a study and information centre as well as reception point for programming. The access points are located in a variety of sites including College extension offices, public schools, community training centres and other available locations. The community as well as the local host thus gains the use of the Contact North/Contact Nord equipment and the expertise of the Contact North/Contact Nord personnel. Various community groups and local education institutions must then develop collaborative arrangements to share the Contact North/Contact Nord resources.

The most common mode of delivery currently being used on the Contact North/Contact Nord network is print and audio tape packages supplemented by audio and computer conferencing. The facsimile machines are being used for rapid turn around of student assignments and tests.

The role and skill of the local community Site Coordinator is of crucial importance to the Contact North/Contact Nord project. The Site Coordinator completes the cycle of cooperation by facilitating collaboration between institution and community learners. The Site Coordinator acts as an information resource, technician, librarian, counsellor, referral service and janitor. The Site Coordinator, as the key community contact must have well developed personal skills as well as credibility and knowledge of the local community in which they work.

The Site Coordinators also serve as community contact points for delivery institutions. Besides assisting in promotion and referral they have an important role in focusing and defining the educational needs of their own communities and feeding that information back to delivery institutions.

The Site Coordinators work 20 hours a week, sharing their work hours between starting and monitoring the delivery of audio conference courses and maintaining regular office hours. The evening office hours allow learners to work with the educational tools located at the access sites as well as meet with the Site Coordinator and other learners for group support, counselling and information.

Contact North/Contact Nord provides additional human resources to enhance distance education creation and delivery. Two Instructional Designers have been hired to work in a consultative role with course teams developing new distance education courseware. Two Secondary School Liaison Officers work with the public school system, assisting in delivery of teleconferencing courses and in the development of pilot projects. Their has been considerable interest shown in the project by principals struggling to offer complete high school programs within very small communities and schools. These professional staff also conduct a variety of inservices designed to assist faculty in acquiring the skills necessary to develop and deliver new distance educational programming.

One of the goals of the project is to enhance programming for targeted groups within Northern Ontario. For this purpose a Francophone liaison Officer as well as a Native Liaison Officer have been contracted to work with community and educational groups to develop and deliver distance education programming.

The Future

This pilot project ends on Mar 31, 1990. Decisions on its future are expected in the fall of 1989 after the evaluation processes are completed. A major issue to be addressed will be the collaborative process, in program development and in the administration of the network. There is no doubt that when resources are scarce and existing institutional mandates can be preserved, sharing makes sense. However, close collaboration requires extra financial resources and institutional and personal commitments. Regardless of the long term decisions taken, collaboration has been remarkably effective to date, as a 27 point network offering over 40 courses was created in less then one year and 15 major development projects were funded.

Such achievement requires considerable institutional support. that Contact North/Contact Nord has come so far in such a short time speaks to the need it has begun to fill and the fact that both institutions and individuals have been prepared to learn new patterns of cooperation to achieve mutually beneficial goals.

CONCLUSION

It is still early to assess the impact and effectiveness of the Contact North/Contact Nord project. In simple numbers, more citizens of Northern Ontario will have accessed secondary and post-secondary educational opportunities. Learners will have access to a broader range of educational activities and delivery institutions and faculty will have had an opportunity to participate in the development and delivery of quality distance education programming. The Province of Ontario, for its investment will have pioneered an advancement in knowledge concerning the application of emerging communications technologies. It will also have invested in the development of high quality distance educational programming and most important in the development of people - both learners and educational developers and deliverers.
De Bono, in his treatise on Future Positive summarizes:

> "We need to nurse new ideas and let them develop to a stage where their potential can be addressed. We need to develop testbeds for ideas, for otherwise an idea can only be judged within the existing framework of experience and its potential will be missed if it is the sort of idea that changes frameworks. We need to encourage plurality, options and choices rather than seek to standardize development. Above all we need to dispel the myth that there is enough creative, constructive effort around and that a good idea will have its due effect."

3 de Bono, Edward, Future Positive, A Book for the Energetic Eighties, Penguin Books: New York, 1980. pp 232-3.